

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for automatically stuffing a tubular food casing with food product, the apparatus comprising:

a stuffing horn through which food product flows into a tubular food casing deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn, the stuffing horn including an input end interconnected with a pressurized source of food product;

a clipping device for closing with a clip the food casing after being stuffed, the clipping device comprising a slot for guiding the clip and an entry into the slot; and

B1
a tape holding lengths of string having end portions secured together to form string loops, the tape being directed toward the clipping device so that a string loop is transferred directly from the tape into the entry into the slot in the clipping device, wherein the entry is positioned in the slot and the tape is positioned relative to the entry so that when the food casing is being closed with the clip, the clip draws the loop to the casing and holds the end portions of the loop ~~between the clip and the food casing~~ ~~between a major portion of the loop and the secured together end portions of the string~~.

2. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising a plurality of rolls including a tape supply roll, a drive roll, a takeup roll and at least one intermediate roll which is proximate the entry so that the secured together end portions of a string loop project from the tape into the entry into the slot as the tape passes around the intermediate roll.

3. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 2 comprising means for driving the drive roll to pull the tape from the supply roll around the intermediate roll.

4. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 3 comprising an edge for catching secured together end portions of a string loop as the string loop passes around the intermediate roll to cause the secured together portions of the string to protrude from the tape into the entry to the slot and to assist in removal of the string loop from the tape.

5. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising an air source that ~~directs~~blows the secured together end portions of the string loop into the entry to the slot.

6. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the secured together portions are secured together by ~~means of~~ a knot.

7. (Cancelled)

8. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising means for radially compressing the food casing after being stuffed to cause a restricted location along a stuffed food casing length, said clipping device being configured to clip the casing at the restricted location.

9-12. (Cancelled)

13. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the clipping device is of sufficiently light weight and is driven by a sufficient power source to obtain a clipping cycle time of less than 3 seconds.


14. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein a conveyor is provided to remove stuffed food product from the vicinity of the clipping device after a stuffed food casing is closed, said conveyor comprising:

a conveying belt defining a conveying surface having a variable length; and

one or more movable slacker idler rollers over which the conveying belt travels, wherein the one or more slacker idler rollers are movable to, permit the length of the conveying surface to be extended and retracted, the idle rollers adapted such that ~~wherein~~ a space between the clipping device and the conveying surface may be enlarged and reduced by retracting and extending the conveying surface length without changing the conveying belt.

15. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 14 comprising:

gatherers to gather a stuffed food casing to form a radial restriction in the stuffed food casing; and

 a conveyor drive cylinder to cause the conveyor conveying surface length to retract to increase the space when the gatherers are operating and to cause the conveying surface length extend to reduce the space and place the conveying surface near the clipping device when the gatherers are dormant.

16-20. (Cancelled)

21. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for automatically stuffing tubular food casing with food product the apparatus comprising:

a stuffing horn through which food product flows into a tubular food casing deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn;

a device for closing the food casing after being stuffed, and a conveyor to remove the food product casing from the vicinity of the device after the food casing is stuffed and closed, wherein the conveyor comprises:


a conveying belt defining a conveying surface, the conveying surface adapted to have ~~having~~ a variable length without replacement of the conveying belt; and

one or more movable slacker idler rollers over which the conveyor belt travels, wherein the one or more slacker idler rollers are adapted to be movable to permit the length of the conveying surface to be extended and retracted without replacement of the

conveying belt, wherein a space between the device for closing the food casing and the conveying surface may be enlarged and reduced by retracting and extending the conveying surface length.

22-24. (Cancelled)

25. (Currently Amended) A method for automatically stuffing tubular food casing with food product comprising:

 passing food product through a stuffing horn into a tubular food casing deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn where an input end of the stuffing horn is interconnected with a pressurized source of food product;

after the food casing is stuffed, closing the food casing with a clip using a clipping device;

transferring a string loop directly from a tape into an entry into a slot in the clipping device so that when the food casing is closed with the clip, the clip draws the loop to the casing and holds the loop to the food casing ~~between a major portion of the loop and the secured together end portions of the string~~ at two or more points along the loop.

26-27. (Cancelled)

28. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 25 comprising causing secured together end portions of a string loop as it passes around an edge to protrude from the tape into the entry to the channel and to assist in removal of the string loop from the tape.

29. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 25 comprising ~~directing~~ blowing the secured together end portions of the string loop into the entry to the channel using an air source; and capturing both end portions of the string between the clip end and the casing.

30-39. (Cancelled)

40. (Currently Amended) A method for automatically stuffing tubular food casing with food product which comprises:

causing food product to flow through a stuffing horn into tubular food casing deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn, an input end of the stuffing horn being interconnected with a pressurized source of food ~~product, product;~~

closing stuffed food casing with a clip using a clipping ~~device, device;~~

removing the stuffed food product from the vicinity of the clipping device after stuffed food casing is closed using a ~~conveyor, conveyor;~~

and extending and retracting the conveyor by means of a structure comprising a conveying belt, said belt traveling over slacker idler rollers beneath a conveying surface of the belt that are adapted to permit the length of the conveying surface to be extended and retracted to extend and reduce a space between the clipping device and the conveying surface without changing the conveying belt.

~~casing between the applied clips.~~

41. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for automatically stuffing a tubular food casing with food product, the apparatus comprising:

a stuffing horn through which food product flows into a tubular food casing deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn;

a clipping device for closing with a clip the food casing after being stuffed, the clipping device comprising a slot for guiding the clip toward the food casing;

a loop for hanging the food casing after the food is stuffed; and

an air source positioned to direct the loop into the slot such that as the clip is directed toward the food casing, the clip draws the loop to the food casing and holds the loop to the food casing at two or more points along the loop.
